

ON MODERN AUTHORITY

THE THEORY AND CONDITION OF WRITING
1500 TO THE PRESENT DAY

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Le sujet d'un poème lui est aussi étranger et aussi important que l'est à un homme son nom.

(Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*)

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analyzed.

(Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*)

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Introduction: Poiesis as Rhetorical Criticism

Good style

helluva hard tay read theez init
stull
if yi canny unnirston thim jiss
clear aff then

gawn
get tay fuck ootma road

ahmaz goodiz thi lota yiz so ah um
ah no whit ahm dayn
tellnyi
jiss try enny a yir fly patir wi me
stick thi bootnyi good style
so ah wull

(Tom Leonard, from 'Six Glasgow Poems')

contemporary semiotics has rightly destroyed residual ideas concerning the simple location of meaning or even of the author. But though a text is discontinuously woven of many strands or codes, there is magic in the web. The sense of an informing spirit, however limited or conditioned, is what holds us. ... at the end of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (as filmed by Truffaut) each exile from the book-burning state adopts the name of a text he has learned by heart and which he represents: one person is now called *David Copperfield*, another *Emile*, or even *Paradise Lost*. ... The extinction in this symbolic situation of the personal names of *both* author and reader shows what ideally happens in the act of reading

(Geoffrey H. Hartman, from 'The Fate of Reading')

Can prose become poetry
through typographical
rearrangement? I
rather think it can.

(Edwin Morgan, in *Times Literary
Supplement*, 28 January 1965)

The Legitimacy of Reading

This is a book about meaning; more particularly, it is about the production, construction, interpretation and 'enactment' of meanings. Thus it is also, and perhaps despite its title, a book about reading; more specifically, it is about critical readings and their 'authorisations'. Before striding into the historical readings produced here, it is apposite to consider the meaning of *reading*, or rather, the meaning of an activity which I shall call *lecture*. The word 'reading' derives from the Old English *raedan*, and there the etymologist finds suggestions of 'considering', 'discerning' and even 'advising' as basic to the sense of the word. At some fundamental level, then, the meaning of 'reading' is already interwoven with residual ideas concerning the exercise of a critical consciousness: a reader is an agent, involved in activity, and not a mere passive recipient or 'patient' who suffers or 'understands' the text. Further, considering the meaning of the activity of lecture, an intimate relation between the notion of reading and that of legitimacy begins to appear. This link is crucial to a theorisation of authority, especially in the post-Gutenberg age of print.

'Lecture', itself another word for reading, derives most immediately from the Latin *lector*, which denotes primarily a reader who reads aloud. Its most common usage was in a context in which clear social relations of authority were established: the *lector* was a slave or servant who read aloud to a master. Considered in the light of this, the notion of literary authority comes under some speculative pressure. For it should be noted here that the person normally thought of, in contemporary theory, as the 'reader' or audience is actually the one who, as master, is in the historical position of 'authority'; while the person dictating or rehearsing the text (nowadays considered as the position of 'author') is in the place of slave or servant and reader, with no personal authority, and no ability to inaugurate or initiate the text or its lecture. Clearly, there are two spheres of authority here: the master has political and even historical authority (the ability to initiate and control historical situations), while the slave occupies a position which we would normally recognise

as being that of 'literary' authority, the position of *scriptor* or writer. A contemporary understanding of reading and authority would see this as an unbearably paradoxical situation: the *scriptor* is in the position of *lector* or reader, and is a slave or patient upon whom history, controlled by other agents, unfolds itself; the reader or audience, as master and agent of this history, occupies the position of 'author'. This is partly explicable in terms of technology: Roman society and culture was predominantly oral, and its literate culture was based on chirographic practice, or on manuscript rather than on print. The literate print culture, the Benjaminian 'age of mechanical reproduction', is, in historical terms, largely an aberration of sorts, located between what Ong calls 'primary' and 'secondary' orality.¹ Print complicates the issue of authority; and the paradoxical arrangement outlined here is of fundamental importance in the theoretical understanding of what might be called 'modern authority', by which I mean literary authority in the post-Gutenberg age (an age which lasts at least until Samuel Morse's first telegraphically communicated message between Baltimore and Washington in 1839).² In print culture, relations between 'authors' and 'readers' is complex and, as I shall argue, fundamentally 'critical'.

Lector itself is cognate with *lex*, a Latin word which is frequently translated as 'law'. But, in the first instance, *lex* signifies a rather more preliminary and provisional stage in the establishment or inscription of a law when a proposing magistrate or assembly might put forward a proposition or motion for debate, prior to its written codification in a constitution. In parliamentary systems of government, which derive from the republican democratic model of Roman law, the equivalent of the *lex* is the preliminary stage of a bill, which has to go through a number of critical readings before passing into the *jus scriptum*, the written legal constitution.³ Interestingly, of course, this immediately offers a second paradox. According to this 'legitimising' procedure in the lecture of a bill, *bulla* or *lex*, reading comes before writing. The reading of the *lex*, the activity of lecture, comes before inscription of a written text or constitutional *jus scriptum*, the law. The proposing *lector* here, although in the position of *scriptor* or author (and even perhaps in the position of

author understood as inaugurator, initiator of the *lex*) does not yet authoritatively 'dictate' the law as such. Rather, the lector offers a λῆξις, a phrase, as a first move in a dialogical situation leading to the establishment of the law as written. It is as if the *lex* had to be read before being written; it has, in fact, to undergo the activity of lecture (with its implications of criticism and dialogue) before being enshrined as written document, constitutive of social and historical relations, or of laws which regulate such relations.⁴

One further item of etymological information is of importance and will clarify the extent to which criticism is integral to the activity of reading. *Lex* not only has a foundation in the Greek λέγω, λόγος, but also in an Indo-European root, *leg-* or *lig-*, connoting binding or fastening together, and with legal implications of obligation. This mutates into the two Latinate forms, *ligere* and *legere*, meaning respectively 'to collect, to select' and 'to read'. Reading involves ideas of sorting or arranging: se-lecting, in fact, in order to confer an arrangement of sorts on the materials found, invented or collected on the page. The Germanic *Lesen* contains both these notions of sorting and reading in the one word; and the sense which is common to both conceptions of the word *Lesen* is precisely an idea of 'examining' (as in *raedan*). This is a primary sense which I want to return to contemporary notions of reading. While reading, the text is not osmotically assimilated, nor passively 'received', but requires critical consciousness, critical attention or examination, and selection with collection. For instance, the repeated themes and motifs, recognisable signs in the text, will be collected together, and items will be taxonomically selected for ranging in each such collection: repeated instances of a proper name, say, will be collected, while a series of descriptions pertinent to this name (as opposed to descriptions of a field or landscape, say) will be selected to constitute the description of a named character. If reading involves such activities, then it radically involves the examination and critical *edition* of a text; and, fundamentally, it must be viewed as an *activity*, undertaken by a historical agent. In this activity, the contemporary reader recapitulates both positions in the Roman legal model outlined here (*lector/scriptor*), and performs an act which can

only really be described as criticism. This criticism in turn is instrumental in the legitimisation—or better, authorisation—of the legible or the read; that is, this criticism constructs and produces the *auctor*, authority or agency which is engendered through the text and its reading. In this collocation of lector and scriptor, print culture in the age of silent reading interiorises the dialectic of literary and historical authority. What we normally think of as the text can now be seen, not as locus of monumentalised enshrined authority, but as ‘pre-text’; and through the reading of this pre-text, there arises the possibility of historical agency on the part of the reader. This is to say, in fact, that ‘texts’ are not usefully considered as ‘containers’ of history, but rather as pre-texts for material and historical activity. History is not ‘in’ the text; rather, the text becomes the condition of history and fully enters into the generation and production of that history.

The historical trajectory of the Roman legal model is instructive, and in one way at least is analogous with what happens to authority at the moment of transference from a predominantly oral or chirographic culture into a print-dominated one. During the period of the republic, the assemblies formed the ground of all legislation. These assemblies, however, although nominally open to all Roman citizens, were actually dominated and controlled entirely by the patricians. In the early years of the republic, especially when the plebeians were struggling to make their voices heard, there was a great deal of civil unrest. The plebeians formed their own assemblies, in which they enacted *plebiscita*, which were, in effect, their own legal system. For it was not until *Lex Hortensia* had been passed, in 287 BC, that *plebiscita* became binding, obligatory or legitimate (i.e. legible, read and heard) for all classes of Roman citizen. By this time, however, questions of social authority and political legislation had already changed their cast. In the early years of the republic, the Senate approved laws only after they had been read, criticised (perhaps amended) and voted on in the popular assemblies. But by the second half of the fourth century BC, the Senate had already arrogated enough power to itself to be able to reverse this procedure. Whereas reading

had been prior to writing, the *leges* open to scrutiny before being passed into the *jus scriptum*, now senatorial writing of the law was to come first. Senatorial assent to the reading of the *leges* was succeeded by the senatorial assumed right of initiative in proposing, and writing, laws themselves. Magisterial assent and the popular voice were correspondingly reduced in importance.

This brings us into proximity with our own contemporary conception of literary authority. For the senate now, in writing the law, become themselves 'authors' in our modern sense, no longer answerable directly to the logically anterior political and historical authority of the assemblies. Rather than their 'readers' or audience (the magistrates and people at large) being able to change, with authority, the text of the law to suit their historical condition more closely or desirably, they simply had to follow, as closely as possible, the monumental written law or authority of the Senate: the text was now written without their consultation, consent or authority. Later still, of course, when Augustus established the age of imperial Rome in 31 BC, this senatorial power and authority passed into the even more restricted arena, in the consciousness of one person, the emperor. A subtle but vitally important change had been effected. Instead of authority being de-delegated among the people at large (the reader/audience), it now became more and more concentrated into the hands or pen of the one proposer of laws, the authoritative emperor, imperial legislator or writer. The legislator was no longer a reader, a serving *lector* asking for the vocal assent of the people to a given provisional proposition, but rather was now a 'dictator', a writer demanding only the legitimisation of the law as written. Such legitimisation, or 'valid reading', meant complete agreement and active accordance with the consciousness of the imperial authority. Our contemporary notions, perhaps no longer shared with quite the same conviction, of the author's 'rights' over the meaning of her or his text, have their roots in a historical situation analogous to this one. When Gutenberg, along with Johann Fust, printed the 'Forty-two line Bible' in Mainz in 1448, the age of the proprietorial literary author, an author understood in terms similar to the Roman imperial authority,

began in Western Europe. As Ong describes this:

Print created a new sense of the private ownership of words. Persons in a primary oral culture can entertain some sense of proprietary rights to a poem, but such a sense is rare and ordinarily enfeebled by the common share of lore, formulas, and themes on which everyone draws. With writing, [and Ong here means printed writing specifically] resentment at plagiarism begins to develop. . . . Typography has made the word into a commodity. The old communal oral world had split up into privately claimed freeholdings.⁵

The idea of authorial 'rights', or 'legitimate authorial privileges', as Fowler calls it, is specifically an effect of print and not at all a theoretical necessity or logical axiom.⁶

One justification for the etymological excursus here into ancient Rome is that the issues which it raises are central to the theorisation of authority in the modern period in Europe. The conflict between writerly authority and political or historical authority (broadly, the authority of writing and that of the voice, typographical literacy versus vocal orality as it were) is central to an age in which, after Gutenberg, writing itself has become more of a social issue, related to questions of power (thus provoking massive state and political censorship and control of written material), and also at a point (the Reformation) when transcendent notions of authority (as vested in the Pope) are being questioned and replaced by more genuinely 'historical' understandings of self-assertion and self-determination.⁷ By roughly 1607, when Shakespeare produced *Coriolanus*, the Roman conflict of authorities became entirely comprehensible to an English audience; and not very long after this, a war which was similar to those civil disturbances of Rome, was 'enacted' or fought out in England precisely over such questions of authority.

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, it should be recalled, requires and asks precisely for the 'voices' of the people when he stands for the consulship in Rome. At that moment, he depends upon their authority for the legitimisation of his own name, title and position. He needs their voices (a word which is cognate with 'votes') in order to legitimise his authority as the named *Coriolanus*. As D.J. Gordon indicates: 'voice like *vox* has a technical sense in grammar: a

voice means *word*, what is uttered, and the voice, utterance, that Coriolanus is asking for, is his name'.⁸ Names, indeed, are important in the play, as a sign of free self-authorisation. When Coriolanus forgets the name of the poor man who sheltered him, the man remains imprisoned; the man is forgotten with the name.⁹ At this moment, then, the state of Rome faces what Habermas calls a 'legitimation crisis',¹⁰ which is what happens in the political system when there is an insufficient 'input' of mass loyalty to maintain the system as an integrated whole. Importantly, the legitimation crisis, following on from what Habermas calls a 'rationality crisis', takes a specific form: 'The legitimation crisis ... is directly an identity crisis'.¹¹ The character here is in that critical stage, hovering between identities as the historical Caius Marcius and the quasi-mythical 'Coriolanus'. In asking for the voices of the people to give him his name, Caius Marcius is aspiring to remove himself from the mire of mere historical, dialogical or consensual authority, and to assume a position of transcendental individuated authority; for the precise name he is asking for is itself a *myth*. The name 'Caius Marcius' denotes the merest historical accidents of birth and existence; 'Coriolanus', on the other hand, denotes transcendental and mythic essence. In his own assumption of this mythic name, his own resolution of the 'legitimation crisis', he strives to assume a position of authority not only in history (as an element in the Habermasian consensus) but also *over* history.¹²

In some respects, the assumed position of Coriolanus is quite like that in which contemporary culture locates the literary author. Coriolanus is supposed now to be a self-legitimising source, an origin in which the essence of the historically produced 'text' is to be found. More pertinently here, the play dramatises precisely the kind of subversion of democratic authority by the imperial *scriptor* which Rome had witnessed. When banished, he turns on the people who had refused their vocal assent to his identity, and strips them of their voices entirely, in an act of revenge in which he identifies himself not as 'Coriolanus' but as 'Rome' itself:

Coriolanus: You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
As reek o' th' rotten fens, whose loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men

That do corrupt my air, I banish you.
And here remain with your uncertainty!¹³

In his 'inverse' banishment of them, he becomes Rome himself, leaving the people behind in the vagaries and uncertainties of history unprotected by the civic ritual of the *polis* or city walls. Further, those he leaves behind are reduced from the status of humans, with the possibility of authorial action vested in their voices, to the status of the merest inconsequential producers of noise, interference: they have no voice and become at best mere barking magistrates.

Coriolanus implies two contrary constitutions of authority. In the first, readers (an audience, people at large) have a voice, and in that possibility of vocal assent to a proposition, they have historical authority, the power to enact that 'text' or subscribe to it. Here, as in the republican democratic Roman legal model, reading is in some sense anterior to writing; and the voice is logically prior to print or writing, at least insofar as the writing or transcription depends upon the voice or vocal assent of the reader being given. The orientation here is from provisional script to fundamental voice, or from text to history. When this is subverted into the second mode of authority, as in *Coriolanus*, the imperial author imposes an orientation which is precisely contrary: from one dictatorial voice to the enshrined and monumental codification of that speech in the written constitution of the law. In this case, writing, ascribed to one individuated transcendent consciousness, precedes reading and determines or delimits what can be said, what is legible and legitimate. Correspondingly, there is a movement away from the vagaries of a history constructed through a Habermasian or Weberian 'rational consensus', and towards the imposition of a transcendentally established code, or essentialisation of human social values and relations, be it in the Justinian Law of the Twelve Tables or any other arbitrary code of historical conduct. A theorisation of modern authority must take this fundamental conflict of orientations as its ground.

Clearly, then, some theoretical clarification of the relation between author and reader in the modern era of print culture is required. My argument here intervenes in the area between

the respective positions of Macherey and de Man regarding these relations. Near the beginning of *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, Macherey puts forward as a basic hypothesis that: 'lire et écrire ne sont pas deux opérations équivalentes ou réversibles: il faut éviter de les prendre l'une pour l'autre'.¹⁴ This is partly in reaction against the Barthesian tendency to confound the two roles, a position which Macherey sees as inherently anti-historical. On the contrary, de Man, who would perhaps have been more at ease with such a Barthesian position, if rigorously applied, manages to conflate the two roles in his brief consideration of a passage in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In the reading constructed by de Man, of a scene of reading in the 'dark coolness' of Marcel's room, he demonstrates, among other things, precisely the opposite thesis to that advanced by Macherey, arguing that 'the distinction between author and reader is one of the false distinctions that the reading makes evident'.¹⁵

The proposition put forward in my own argument mediates between these two courses. While acknowledging that the material reader and author are in some fundamental historical way separate positions or poles, as in Macherey (I am not T. S. Eliot, nor was meant to be, for example), I reverse or confound the positions usually ascribed to these roles (which is part of the impetus of de Man's thesis). The reader, the critical consciousness located in history, is the position which authorises or legitimises the text or its reading. The author is the 'co-respondent' of this reader, and writes or transcribes the text in the face of its own critical reading, a legitimisation of the provisional *lex*, or, following Barthes, *lexie*, which establishes the very possibility and condition of the text itself. The text, then, does now indeed come to us as, in Jameson's phrase, the 'always-already-read';¹⁶ but whereas he means to suggest by this that texts come to us already saturated with cultural interpretations and cluttered by prejudicial or ideological judgements, I want to add the important corollary that the text is actually produced as 'always already read' *before* it has been written or 'legitimised'.

As the etymological excursus at the opening of this intro-

duction makes clear, these ideas are not entirely new, although they may seem shocking to an age which understands print as a norm, and a culture which does not question the intellectual effect of print. Kenneth Burke suggests another possible source for similar theorisations of authority, again with primary reference to cultural artifacts which hover between existence as written composition and sound, in Boethius on music. He writes that:

Boethius excludes performers from the number of real musicians, since they are merely slaves, obeying orders. The composers are also excluded, since they are merely inspired, and the Muses are responsible for their contribution. Then there are the critics. 'They alone are the real musicians, since their function consists entirely in reason and philosophy, in a knowledge of modes and rhythm, of the varieties of melodies and their combinations'¹⁷

This maps fairly congruently onto my own position here, but with the important proviso that the critic is also aware of her or his own historical position. This critic should be concerned to produce more philosophical voices, more music in this instance; it would be the function of literary criticism at the present time, by analogy, to produce more potential readers and more voices able to partake as conscious and critical agents in the construction not of more texts, but of more history.¹⁸ If poets are, in Shelley's phrase, 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world',¹⁹ then it is the function of criticism to produce more poets, not necessarily in the sense of more imperialist individuated authors, but in the sense of more voices which can actively take part in this legislation, this procedure of historical authorisation of social activity.

Intentionality: Writing Rites, Speaking Rights

The Boethian musical analogy brings into question the materiality or ontological status of the text. For the musical score is not itself the music that we hear; it must be 'enacted' or played, and can vary from one execution to the next, depending upon conductorial interpretation of the score, or